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# **The Role of the Press in Helping Create the Conditions of Democracy to Develop in Haiti**

MICHELE MONTAS-DOMINIQUE\*

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

In a season of fear, intolerance, political confusion, polarization, and weakened institutions, where hope is so scarce in Haiti, it is difficult for the Haitian press to assess its progress or its own contribution to a fragile democracy. Since the assassination of Jean Dominique ten months ago, the most well known and respected journalist in the country and a symbol of the fight for democracy, Haitian journalists have attempted to analyzing the role of the media and, in the process, have undergone an exercise in soul-searching.

Dominique's assassination on April 3, 2000, stunned the country. He had survived the Duvalier years; he had been jailed, had known two exiles, and had his radio station ransacked by the macoutes and the political police in 1980. Radio Haiti was shot at five or six times during the military regimes that followed the fall of Jean Claude Duvalier. Despite surviving all of this, Jean Dominique was assassinated under a democratic government, at a time when press freedom seemed in full bloom. With Dominique's murder still unresolved, fear has become a staple of daily life for some Haitian journalists.

Several radio stations have received threats from different ends of the political spectrum, as have politicians, religious leaders, judges, members of trade unions, and members of the government. The orchestrated violence of the last few weeks, the impunity that seems to prevail, the apparent inability of the new police force to ensure security, and the government failure to enforce authority, definitely impacts on the ability of journalists to report the news. In this article, I will attempt to analyze, based on my personal experiences, the change in the situation of the Haitian press in the last twenty-five years, from a time of tight government censorship to an era of slowly increasing self-censorship under a democratic government. I will try to put in perspective the role the press has played in establishing a democracy in Haiti, as well as its shortcomings and weaknesses.

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\* This article is based on the personal experiences of the author, a journalist for Radio Haiti.

## II. ELITE JOURNALISM

To put into perspective the role of the press in the last twenty-five years, a brief look at the Haitian media in the nineteen and early twentieth century is useful. This was an age marked by a tumultuous history of civil wars, military coups, and general unrest, where foot soldiers were called upon to bring one of several competing warlords to power in Port au Prince, only to return to their mountains and valleys once their leader tightly held the reins of government. This was an age where politics and the media were strictly the affairs of a tiny elite, with no participation of the majority in the affairs of the state. This was an age of countless newspapers that lasted only for a transition season, or for a government. Journalism existed not to report on the truth, but rather functioned as a tool used to gain political power.

Newspapers were then the main arena for political debate, with editorials and commentaries the main staple, except for rare trade and commercial publications. Journalists were thrown in jail, at one time or another. In this battlefield of elite journalism, newspapers appeared, then disappeared, or changed their format and their name. Between 1804, the year of Haiti's independence, to 1950, 885 newspapers were published. Of the forty-two major newspapers between 1804 and the American Occupation of 1915, thirty had a life span of a year. Only two dailies, *Le Nouvelliste*, founded in 1896, and *Le Matin*, founded in 1907, have survived. The four existing Haitian weeklies were born in the last twenty years, however all four are published in the United States.

## III. A MEDIA REVOLUTION

The press in the early years of Duvalier (1957-1970) experienced tight government censorship. A number of publications were closed, such as the influential daily *La Phalange*, that was close to the Catholic Church. The four remaining dailies were pro-government. Political editorials disappeared. Instead, official speeches were printed in full. This all occurred as most organized groups, such as teachers, university students, and unions, were crushed in the early 1960s. Stories about Haiti were cut out from foreign newspapers and magazines before distribution. Local news coverage focused on social or cultural issues, reflecting the life of the same tiny elite that had now risen to become the barons of the new regime. With no tradition of reporting, news was covered from a desk.

A personal anecdote might illustrate the situation at the time. I started my career as a journalist in 1972, in the daily, *Le Nouvelliste*. Despite having a degree in political affairs from the University of Maine, I was assigned to cover cultural events. Early one morning, I

heard about a major fire in Port au Prince. Without contacting my editor (as the phone, of course, did not work), I went to the scene and interviewed people, covering all the angles and then rushed back to the paper to write my story. Once there, I found one of the senior “journalists,” comfortably seated at his desk and telling me in a condescending manner that I should not have bothered because he had already written the story from various sources. Going to the scene and talking to witnesses was irrelevant to him. His story was printed.

A media revolution, however, slowly developed in the early 1970s and it was initiated by one man, Jean Dominique, and one media outlet, Radio Haiti. Newspapers traditionally were written in French and the few radio stations and sole television station then in existence also broadcasted only in the language of the elite. Radio Haiti introduced Creole, spoken by all Haitians, as a working language for its news. On its programming, Radio Haitian carried French newscasts with interviews in Creole and one major newscast a day was entirely in Creole.

The use of Creole as an information tool had a tremendous impact on expanding the democratic horizons of the majority of Haitians in the early 1970s. First it broke the traditional isolation of the majority. The transistor age provided cheap radios that were available in even the most remote areas of Haiti. People from the rural areas, the area that had been called for almost two centuries “the country outside,” could suddenly learn about and understand what was happening in the “Republic of Port au Prince.” One of the means of ruling Haiti under the Duvalier dictatorship was to divide the country into smaller units. Regional *Macoute* commanders controlled the Artibonite, or the South. Suddenly, on the airwaves, these artificial barriers erected by the central power in Port au Prince were breaking down.

The voices of the Creole-speaking poor—the peasants, the small shopkeepers in Cap Haitien or Gonaives, the fisherman of Lully or Anse d’Hainault—were heard, not by proxy, but directly. Through radio, those who had been systematically isolated by a repressive power but also by geography, bad roads, and illiteracy could now reach each other. Economic frontiers began to break down. The coffee growers in Plaisance could now learn the price of coffee on the international markets, and at the same time, could listen to coffee growers in Fond Jean Noel talk of the unfair prices paid by coffee traders. The use of Creole in the news also meant empowerment for the majority who, for the first time, could express themselves directly via a microphone to a listening audience, discuss their own problems, and suggest their own solutions. It also spread the spirit and the methods of resistance to repression,

anchored in Haiti's revolutionary past, from one part of the country to the next.

The translation of international news brought home the notions of rights, accountability, and justice under a repressive regime. Indirectly, it touched the political sphere. While local political reporting, outside of the regime's official position was still risky in the late 1970s, international news in Creole, indirectly reached the Haitian political sphere. Since it was not possible to talk about our own dictatorship, Radio Haiti covered closely the 1979 fall of Anastasio Somoza in Nicaragua. When Radio Haiti's reporter in Managua announced that the Sandinistas had entered the Nicaraguan capital, Haitians in the streets, their ears glued to transistor radios, cheered. They could. It was Somoza's fall, not Jean Claude Duvalier's.

The constraints on political reporting, however, remained the same. It was hazardous to cover political topics in the late 1960s and all throughout the 1970s. When Jean Dominique and another reporter covered the kidnapping of the American Ambassador by a group of five young "rebels," he was called to the National Palace and threatened by Luc Desir, the Head of the Political Police, the most feared of Duvalier's henchmen. The hostage takers freed the diplomat and left the country under the protection of the French Ambassador, along with four political prisoners whose release they had obtained. Luc Desir, with one hand on his Bible, and the other hand on his uzi machine gun, accused Jean Dominique of broadcasting information that was dangerous to the welfare of the State. Desir was angry Dominique had revealed that the hostage takers were armed only with a water-pistol and that the American Ambassador, Clinton Knox, then very close to the Duvalier regime, had been drinking.

Even when Jean Claude Duvalier succeeded his father in 1971 and progressively liberalized the regime under pressure from the Carter administration in the United States, independent journalism remained risky. Most investigative reporting was too dangerous to venture into. Slowly, however, journalists were finding ways to force open the gates of censorship. They began to talk of previously taboo subjects, such as the flight of boat people toward the shores of the Bahamas or the promised land of Miami. Then, the "golden age of the pioneers ended" as the political police broke the backbone of the democratic movement.

On November 28, 1980, Radio Haiti was silenced. Its studios were ransacked and all of Radio Haiti's journalists were jailed. Some were tortured and some were later expelled to the United States, Canada, and Venezuela. Journalists from two other media outlets, human rights activists, labor union leaders, and students were also arrested. The other

radio stations ceased broadcasting news. Silence fell on the country. The regime thought that by breaking the thermometer, they would cure the patient. They were wrong.

Slowly, another electronic media, protected by the powerful Catholic Church, Radio Soleil, started once more to expand the tight limits of freedom, following the same path Radio Haiti had traced. Five years after the crackdown on the democratic movement and the press, it became possible to evaluate the leading role the press had played from 1968 to 1980. The demonstration in Gonaives that brought down the Duvalier regime took place on November 28, 1985, the anniversary of the crackdown on the press. On February 7, 1986, Jean Claude Duvalier was forced to leave Haiti.

#### IV. SPRING TIME

After 1986 and the fall of the Duvalier regime, young, eager, enthusiastic, and poorly educated journalists burgeoned like mushrooms after rainfall. They learned their new trade through the streets. The instant fame that journalism brought to a young reporter compensated for the poor salaries. Demonstrations were part of everyday life, as this was a season of popular mobilization for democratic rights: freedom of speech; the right to assemble; and the right to justice. The press, still dominant on the airwaves, fed on the turbulence of daily events, seldom going below the surface. The spoken word, through statements and declarations uttered loud and clear, making up for many years of silence, became a collective Haitian catharsis. In retrospect, it is evident that in spite of a new constitution approved by vote in 1987 which promoted Creole as an official language and guaranteed the rights to education and health services, the fall of the dictatorship did not mean profound changes in the exclusion system that had prevailed for the last two centuries.

The fall of the dictatorship did lead however to the right of free speech and the right of association. For the first time since 1960, labor unions or cooperatives were created anew and allowed to structure themselves. Between 1986 and 1991, the press, by being simply an echo chamber for opinions and the free circulation of ideas and information, contributed tremendously to rebuilding Haitian civil society, at least in the major cities. The media stopped short, however, of both the leading role it enjoyed in the late 1970s and public expectations.

Most privately-owned commercial media refused to venture into the type of investigative journalism needed for at the time. Only a few big stories were aired or printed that unveiled corruption in the judiciary system, Haitian women being used as guinea pigs in health centers for

large American pharmaceutical interests, or the struggle of peasants against local sheriffs, known as "chefs de section," who still held absolute power over the countryside. Of course, the military was ready to strike, although with methods different from those of the early 1980s, to protect the old system, therefore, the exercise of free speech was still risky.

#### V. BALKANIZATION OF THE MODERN HAITIAN PRESS

The army did strike when the participation of a majority of Haitians shook the very foundation of the old system. The coup d'état of 1991, seven months after the election of Jean Bertrand Aristide by an overwhelming majority of citizens, was essentially an attempt to crush that popular participation. Beyond the massacre of 5,000, beyond the mass departures and the internal exiles from one town to another, the coup had a profound impact on the press. Repression was not the only tool. Because a few of the media had been the catalyst of the democratic participation, in the 1970s and 1980s and because crushing the press had not worked, a new system was devised to control the media. By distributing a great number of frequencies in the FM band to the military and the elite, the media landscape of today was created.

The balkanization of the press can be easily seen. More than forty commercial radio stations now operate on the FM band in Port au Prince alone. These stations are controlled for the most part by the same rich sponsors (old and new money) that financed the 1991 coup. Many do not have to rely on advertisement revenues. Most of these media stations are opposed to the democratic government and have not turned the page of the coup. Their sheer multiplicity has worsened the confusion that has plagued Haitian society by keeping the population split into thousands of voices.

#### VI. CHALLENGES FACING THE HAITIAN PRESS

The lack of objectivity and professional ethics of most journalists has caused the erosion of that bond of trust that existed between the majority of the population and the media in 1986. This aggravates the existing political divisions and limits the ability of the Haitian press to help rebuild the institutions of our fragile democracy. When a confrontation between competing gangs in the large slum of Cite Soleil recently degenerated into a small war, the neighborhood selected which journalists would be allowed entrance to cover the event. Only two were. Moreover, sensationalism has brought libelous accusations and threats that are aired or printed on a daily basis in a general climate of impunity.

Further, such sensationalism breeds the violence that undermines democracy in today's Haiti.

The control of commercial interest over the media translates into a new form of censorship that has nothing to do with government control of the press. Some stories are under reported or slanted. For example, when eighty children died after swallowing tainted cough syrup produced by a local pharmaceutical firm, the guilty firm paid off six or seven journalists from selected media. This created a public relation pool that helped to slow to a halt the judicial recourse of the families. This could not have happened in the 1980s. Additionally, it should be noted that very few journalists now live strictly off their salaries. Many receive additional pay checks from different sources, such as private companies or government services, and think nothing of it.

More importantly, the media does very little to help to integrate the majority of the country to the "Republic of Port au Prince." Very few positive stories on issues that are of concern to the peasantry ever make it to the front page of a newspaper or a news broadcast, unless there is some international organization involved in a project. To the major private media, once more, as was the case in the past, the majority is becoming invisible.

## VII. CONCLUSION

The Haitian press is at a crossroads. While freedom of the press is a reality, the media in the past few years at times has played a negative role in the reinforcement of democracy. Recent events, however, such as the assassination of a journalist who was seen as the conscience of the press, have forced some to take a hard look at our profession. Once again, some media are playing a positive role in exposing recent violations of power on the part of local officials or extensively covering fragile institutions like the judiciary, that are vital for strengthening democracy. If the press is to truly help create the conditions necessary to create the conditions needed to develop democracy in Haiti, it must move past the balkanization and sensationalism of the 1990s and report and speak for all Haitians.